

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: GDS
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SUBJECT: LAW & ORDER ISSUE TAKES CENTER STAGE

REF: ROME 0983, ROME 1188

SUMMARY: A WAVE OF ARMED ROBBERIES AND POLITICALLY INSPIRED VIOLENCE IS FORCING THE LAW AND ORDER ISSUE TO THE FOREFRONT OF PRE-ELECTORAL POLITICAL DEBATE. A "SUMMIT" OF THE LEADERS OF THE FOUR CENTER-LEFT PARTIES TO DISCUSS GOVERNMENT MEASURES IN THE LAW AND ORDER FIELD IS NOW SET FOR MARCH 13. THIS ISSUE IS HAVING A DIVISIVE IMPACT ON THE ALREADY UNCOHESIVE CENTER-LEFT PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY. HOWEVER, MOST OBSERVERS PREDICT THAT THE MORO GOVERNMENT WILL SURVIVE AT LEAST LONG ENOUGH TO SEE THE IMPORTANT JUNE REGIONAL ELECTIONS HELD ON SCHEDULE. END SUMMARY.

1. IN RECENT WEEKS A SERIES OF ARMED ROBBERIES AND BLOODY INCIDENTS OF POLITICALLY INSPIRED VIOLENCE HAVE FOCUSED PUBLIC ATTENTION ON THE LAW AND ORDER ISSUE. A PARTICULARLY BOLD AND DRAMATIC HOLDUP OF A ROME POST OFFICE ON FEBRUARY 21 COST THE LIFE OF A YOUNG POLICEMAN AND CAUSED THE SUBSEQUENT ATTEMPTED SUICIDE OF HIS FIANCE. THIS INCIDENT CAUGHT THE PUBLIC SYMPATHY AND STIRRED A WAVE OF OPEN PROTEST IN POLICE RANKS IN SEVERAL MAJOR CITIES. THESE HAVE PRODUCED URGENT CALLS FOR A BETTER DEFINED RIGHT TO SELF DEFENSE BY LAW
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OFFICERS. FOUR OTHER ARMED ROBBERIES OCCURRED IN THE ROME AREA

ON THE SAME DAY AS THE POST OFFICE KILLING, AND SIMILAR CRIMES IN OTHER LOCALITIES HAVE RECEIVED HEAVY PRESS PLAY. MAJOR RECENT ART THEFTS IN URBINO AND MILAN, AND VIOLENCE ASSOCIATED WITH RECENT UNIVERSITY COUNCIL ELECTIONS (SEP AIRGRAM) HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO A PUBLIC IMPRESSION THAT THE SITUATION IS GETTING OUT OF HAND.

2. AS COMMON CRIMINALITY CONTINUES TO INCREASE AND TO ASSUME BOLDER AND BLOODIER FORMS, THERE HAVE BEEN ANUMBER OF DRAMATIC INSTANCES OF POLITICALLY MOTIVATED CRIMES AND VIOLENCE. ON FEBRUARY 18 A MACHINE GUN WIELDING COMMANDO OF "RED BRIGADE" ADHERENTS FREED A TOP REF BRIGADE LEADER, RENATO CURCIO, FROM A MINIMUM SECURITY PRISON NEAR TURIN. ON FEBRUARY 28 VIOLENCE FLARED IN ROME BETWEEN GROUPS OF EXTRA-PARLIAMENTARY LEFT AND NEO-FASCISTS TOWNS. THE OCCASION WAS THE OPENING OF THE TRIAL OF LEFT EXTREMISTS ACCUSED OF THE ARSON MURDER IN APRIL 1973 OF TWO SONS OF THE SECRETARY OF A ROME SECTION OF THE FAR RIGHT MSI PARTY. IN THE ENSUING BATTLE, A GREEK NATIONAL BELONGING TO THE MSI UNIVERSITY ORGANIZATION (FUAN) WAS SHOT AND KILLED. STREET BATTLES BETWEEN LEFT AND RIGHT EXTREMISTS IN THE CENTER OF ROME BROKE OUT FOLLOWING A REQUIEM MASS FOR THE DEAD STUDENT ON MARCH 3 AND CONTINUING SPORADIC CLASHES HAVE SINCE DISTURBED THE CALM OF THE CAPITAL.

3. AGAINST THIS BACKGROUND OF VIOLENCE ALL THE POLITICAL PARTIES, GEARING UP FOR THE REGIONAL ELECTIONS IN JUNE, HAVE TAKEN STANDS ON THE LAW AND ORDER ISSUE. THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS (DC) ARE BACKING NEW LEGISLATIVE PROPOSALS TO RESTRICT THE GRANTING OF PROVISIONAL LIBERTY (A FORM OF "BAIL") AND LIBERALIZE POLICE RULES FOR THE USE OF FIREARMS IN SELF DEFENSE. IN ADDITION, THE DC-LED MORO GOVERNMENT HAS SUBMITTED TO PARLIAMENT A LAW INCREASING PENALTIES FOR THE POSSESSION OF DANGEROUS WEAPONS, AND THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS ARE PRESSING DEMANDS FOR LIMITED POLICE POWERS TO ARREST AND DETAIN CRIMINAL SUSPECTS. THIS LATTER PROVISION IS ADAMANTLY OPPOSED BY THE SOCIALISTS.

4. THE PSI HAS ORGANISED A HIGH VISIBILITY NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON LAW AND ORDER IN MILAN THIS WEEKEND TO PUBLICIZE ITS POLICE REFORM AND ANTI-CRIME PROPOSALS. BOTH THE PSI AND CONFIDENTIAL

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THE COMMUNISTS HAVE EMPHASIZED THEIR POSITION THAT THE NEO-FASCISTS ARE RESPONSIBLE, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, FOR VIRTUALLY ALL POLITICAL VIOLENCE THAT "ENDANGERS THE STATE."

5. BECAUSE OF DIFFERENCES OF APPROACH TO THE LAW AND ORDER ISSUE WITHIN THE CENTE-LEFT MAJORITY, MOST VISIBLE BETWEEN THE SOCIALISTS AND SOCIAL DEMOCRATS, SOME OBSERVERS HAVE EXPRESSED FEAR THAT THE VIABILITY OF THE MORO GOVERNMENT

MIGHT BE THREATENED. SOME SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AND LIBERALS IN PRIVATE HAVE SUGGESTED THAT A GOVERNMENT CRISIS ON THIS ISSUE MIGHT NOT BE A BAD THING, AS IT WOULD PROBABLY LEAD TO EARLY NATIONAL ELECTIONS SUPPLANTING THE JUNE REGIONAL CONTESTS. THESE SOURCES FEAR THAT SOCIALIST AND COMMUNIST GAINS WOULD BE GREATER IN THE REGIONAL ELECTIONS THAN IN NATIONAL ELECTIONS WHERE POLITICAL ISSUES ARE PARAMOUNT AND WHERE THE DC TRADITIONALLY DOES BETTER THAN IN LOCAL ELECTIONS. THERE IS NO ANSWER, HOWEVER, TO THE QUESTION OF WHO MIGHT BE PREPARED TO ACCEPT THE ONUS OF PROVOKING A CRISIS AND EARLY NATIONAL ELECTIONS. DESPITE THE PREOCCUPATION WITH WHICH MANY ON THE CENTER AND RIGHT OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM VIEW THE PROSPECT OF REGIONAL ELECTIONS, IT DOES NOT APPEAR LIKELY THAT THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS WOULD NOW SUPPORT A SOCIAL DEMOCRAT EFFORT TO PULL THE PLUG ON THE MORO GOVERNMENT. NOR IS THERE MUCH EVIDENCE TO INDICATE THE PSDI HAS DECIDED IT CAN AFFORD TO ATTEMPT TO PROVOKE A RUPTURE WITH THE MAJORITY.

6. A "SUMMIT" MEETING OF THE TOP LEADERSHIP OF THE FOUR CENTER-LEFT PARTIES HAS NOW BEEN SCHEDULED FOR MARCH 13 FOLLOWING PREMIER MORO'S RETURN FROM THE DUBLIN EEC CHIEFS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING. THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS HAVE REFRAINED FROM INCLUDING THE CONTROVERSIAL PROVISION FOR POLICE POWERS OF ARREST AND TEMPORARY DETENTION ON SUSPICION IN THE LEGISLATIVE PACKAGE THEY ARE PRESENTING TO PARLIAMENT. IT IS GENERALLY BELIEVED THAT THIS IS A CONCESSION TO THE PSI TO SECURE SOCIALIST PARTICIPATION IN THE FOUR PARTY SUMMIT WHICH HAS BEEN ACTIVELY SOUGHT BY THE DC AND SOCIAL DEMOCRATS.

7. COMMENT: MOST OBSERVERS DO NOT BELIEVE THAT THE MARCH 13 "SUMMIT" IS LIKELY TO TRIP UP THE MORO GOVERNMENT, ALTHOUGH THIS POSSIBILITY CANNOT BE EXCLUDED. DC SOURCES HAVE STEADILY MAINTAINED THAT THE TACTICAL ALLIANCE BETWEEN PREMIER MORO

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AND DC SECRETARY FANFANI IS BASED ON A FANFANI COMMITMENT TO SEE THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT THROUGH THE REGIONAL ELECTIONS IN RETURN FOR MORO'S KEY BACKING OF FANFANI IN PARTY AFFAIRS. HOWEVER, THE FACT THAT THE CENTER-LEFT PARTIES ARE BEING FORCED TO HOLD A SUMMIT MEETING IN ORDER TO DISCUSS THE LAW AND ORDER SITUATION IS INDICATIVE OF THE POLITICAL IMPORTANCE AND DISRUPTIVE POTENTIAL OF THE ISSUE. TOGETHER WITH THE ECONOMIC SITUATION AND THE ONGOING DEBATE ON THE "HISTORIC COMPROMISE", THIS ISSUE IS LIKELY TO REMAIN AT THE CENTER OF PUBLIC ATTENTION DURING THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN BEGINNING TO GET UNDER WAY. VOLPE

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